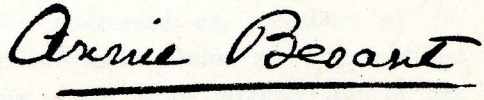
ANNIE BESANT

(P.T.S. 1907-1933)

THEOSOPHY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF THOUGHT AND ACTION

BESANT CENTENARY 1947



1847—1947

FOREWORD

By C. Jinarājadāsa
President of the Theosophical Society

As many as are the sands of the sea, so are the possible expositions of Theosophy as a Philosophy of Thought and Action. In our modern world, the first great exposition was by H. P. Blavatsky. Her monumental work, *The Secret Doctrine*, gives us the basic material of our philosophy; some of its applications are given by her in her *The Key to Theosophy*, *Practical Occultism* and *The Voice of the Silence*. But she might have given us dozens more expositions had she lived longer.

Then came her successor, Annie Besant. From the day she joined the Theosophical Society in 1888 to the end, she gave us exposition after exposition of what the Divine Wisdom can be to all men as a gospel of ideal life and service. She saw life from the mountain tops, not from the valleys. That was one wonder in her exposition.

But when she addressed us, members of the Society, in the intimate circles at Theosophical Conventions, she spoke more directly out of her

heart and her knowledge, and especially out of the experiences of a hard battle in search of Truth. I recall some of these Convention Addresses, extracts from which follow. The intensity of her thought and feeling, her breadth of vision as she contemplated us and the work for Theosophy which we are trying to do, her warm sense of fellowship with us all as she shared with us her experiences, her hopes and dreams—all these are vivid to me.

It is in order that this intensity may become yours also, that on this, the 100th Anniversary of Annie Besant's birthday, the Vice-President, Mr. Sidney A. Cook, and I have selected a few extracts from her Convention addresses.

I recall that once 45 years ago she wrote in a friend's album, "Climb that others may follow." In testimony that we too make that phrase the motto of our life, we celebrate today her service to mankind, first in the period before she knew Theosophy, and then when later she proclaimed the wonder and beauty of the Eternal Wisdom with ringing voice and brilliant pen and especially by what she organized for us of new ways of Service.

C. JINARĀJADĀSA

THEOSOPHY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF THOUGHT AND ACTION

To the Members of the Theosophical Society

1914

I WANT to ask from each one of you a development of that perfect Tolerance which is one of the great qualifications for becoming a disciple of the Masters of Compassion. I want to ask each of you, as members of the Society, to guard the liberty of thought within the Society as its most precious possession, and to guard that neutrality of the Society of which I spoke in my public lecture. Remember we have members of every religion and every line of work; . . . Some years hence the Society will be so large, that no one will presume to connect it with any special line of local or public activity. We are coming towards that point where the public will recognise that we have amongst us people of all lines of thought and work, those against political activity, those in favour of political activity. If you can only hold steadily to the neutrality of the Society for a few years, until the numbers have become very much larger, then you will find that no

one line of activity will run the danger of compromising the neutrality of the Society as a whole. That is your duty. Make the public understand that nothing your President does, outside or inside her Theosophical work, binds the Theosophical Society; that even within it her translation of Theosophy is not endorsed by all, and that every member has an equal right with hers to translate Theosophy in his own way. Try to remember that you and I are not at the end of human evolution, but have ages of evolution yet in front of us; that our view of any great truth must be an imperfect view, we being imperfect beings. That which I myself am at present saying to you as a translation of Theosophical teaching, whether on the Divine Unity, whether on the nature of the human Spirit, whether an exposition of the Law of Karma, whether new light thrown on the doctrine of Reincarnation —the whole of these explanations are partial and imperfect, and they must not be stereotyped, must not be fettered on the limbs of future generations, who will be carrying on our work centuries hence. I am telling you what is true from the standpoint of today; I cannot tell you what will be true from the standpoint of centuries hence. Then humanity will have advanced further; the higher mind will have evolved further than today; buddhi will be more developed; insight and intuition will be stronger

than they are now; and it is not desirable that we should so fossilise our own opinions, that we shall have to break them to pieces when we come back centuries hence. Many of us have had to suffer from breaking the fetters into which we were born; many of us have had to go through bitter agony, when we had to break away from the old ties which we had outgrown. Let us, by the memory of our own past suffering, guard our children and grandchildren from similar pain; let us take the humble position that we are imperfect, that we only catch glimpses of the Truth. If even the Masters Themselves are on the line of upward evolution, what of us who have not attained liberation? If they are evolving, how much more are we? If they are still discovering new Truth, how much more Truth there must be to be unfolded to the purblind eyes of man. Our duty is to seek for Truth, and Truth is infinite, and infinite also is the search thereafter. Therefore I ask you to help me to guard the perfect liberty of thought, the perfect liberty of expression, in the T. S., knowing that it is as true now as it was true in the days of Milton: "Let Truth and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a fair encounter?" Great words were used by Charles Bradlaugh when speaking of the value of free discussion, of argument; he said that in these battles for Truth, "Truth has laurels for the victor and the

vanquished—laurels for the Victor, in that he hath maintained the Truth : laurels yet welcome to the vanquished, whose defeat has crowned him with a Truth that he knew not of before."

1920

Brethren, in your hands is placed the greatest of all trusts, the helping forward of the spiritual life of the world. For Those who rule and teach the world have sent the Society out into it, and pour out Their Life through it, far and wide, for the uplift of mankind. Many Masters help various Societies, for everywhere They seek channels for the outpouring of Their life on the world. But into this Society of the DIVINE WISDOM, Their special Messenger, the whole Hierarchy sends forth the stream of Their abounding Love and Strength, in order that the whole world may receive Their benediction. In the Ashrama of the two Masters who founded the Society is a map of the world, a map with living motion, whereon are traced in lines of glowing colours the great religions of the world. . . . And our Theosophical Society is there, a line of living light, white light, since it is the custodian of the Ancient Wisdom, which sends its currents into every Faith ; and every Lodge is a little flame, like an electric spark, and glows or becomes dim as it lets its light shine forth or grow feeble. And there

They who sent out the life-current, glance at its streamings, and see how each little centre is shedding its light on the world, or is letting it grow dull and faint. Such is your trust, your privilege and your responsibility. The Eyes that never sleep are watching over the world in this hour of its travail. They see the helpers and the sluggards, the workers and the idlers. See to it, each of you, gathered here in the heart of the Society, that you do not prove unworthy of your charge, unfit for your trust. Go out into the world, and spread the Light.

1921

There is a good deal of difference of opinion on matters of doctrine, and I think that is a very healthy sign. Unless we have differences of opinion on matters of doctrine, we shall inevitably become a Church or a sect. It is not our business to become either, for we are a society of students, and if all students agree there will be a very poor advance. We test all new thought, and follow or reject it, as it affects our own intelligence. We do not want to remain stationary, but to welcome new thought, while we examine it. We want individual thinking; we want that every member, as far as possible, should study the great truths of all religions, should use his own intelligence to judge of their value, to follow them or not to follow them. We must remember that

conscience is the inheritance of our Past. All problems that we have often met with, all doctrines in religions to which we have belonged, in all these our conscience is likely to speak, because it has had experience of them. All our past experience comes out piecemeal as what we call conscience. But the very worst thing any human being can do is to take the conscience of another as his guide instead of his own. It may be that the other man's conscience is much more developed than is his. But how is it going to develop *his* conscience? Only as he adds to it new experiences of his own continually, can it become more of a self-realisation than a hearsay-instructed conscience, which may be more accurate about certain facts. You may remember the story of an English Archbishop, Archbishop Laud, I think, but am not sure. He made a very sensible remark. A Puritan, brought before him for punishment for difference of opinion on religion, said that he was following his conscience. "Yes," said the Archbishop, "that is quite right; but take care that your conscience is not the conscience of a fool." That was a little rough, but there is a great deal of sense in it. People think conscience is the voice of God. It is nothing of the kind. It is the voice of past experience, and if we have not been through previous experience of it, a thing does not touch our conscience at all. Following conscience is everybody's

duty. If you are going to try to be set firm in every thought and belief, you only create a fossil instead of a growing life, and this not only in what we may call matters of fact. We are very often much mistaken as to what we think to be a matter of fact. We cannot help it. We do not see all of the truth, any one of us. We are not big enough. If we could see the whole truth, even about our own world, we should be Masters. We should not be here, walking and talking in the ordinary way. We may see what by itself is a fact, but we do not see it in its relations to other facts. Take an illustration. There is a great picture with a cover over it, and I make a hole in the cover, you see a little bit of the picture, a blue patch and nothing more. You will be quite right as long as you say: "I see blue," provided you are not colour-blind. But even in that, if you go into shades of the colour, you may be wrong, because it is surrounded by other colours which affect it. You might think that it is a bit of the sky, or sea. It might be one of the colours of a snowy peak when the sun rises. It might be the blue of a human eye, or of a woman's dress. Under the circumstances, if you will apply the parable to people and facts, you will realise that what you see as a fact, if accurately observed, is a truth, but it has relation to other facts that must be known, before you are able to generalise about the truth.

Also your standard makes a difference. If you look at the lower plane from the higher plane, the difference of your judgment from that of the standpoint of the lower will be marked. The higher is like one standing in the centre of a circle, and the other is like one standing on the circumference of the circle. You may look centrally from any intermediate point of the compass, and you may have to walk in an opposite direction to reach the centre. From the south you must walk towards the north, and from the north you must walk towards the south, till you come to the same point, the centre, you are going towards. So the expansion of consciousness is a new revelation of fact. I have found that out so often. There is always something to learn, something to study, some goal to aim at. I thoroughly sympathise with H.P.B.'s view that the great joy of Theosophy is that you are always discovering something new. As to that there is no end, for He, the Supreme, is infinite.

1923

You are, or ought to be, students of Theosophy, and most of you should have mastered sufficient of its teachings, as to be capable of applying them to the helping of the world. Of what use your knowledge, if you wrap it up in a napkin and leave it on a shelf? What are you doing, what is each of

you doing, to bring what you know to the rebuilding of our shattered world? I am not asking you to commit the Society to any special religious, political, social or economic view. But I am asking you to apply the treasures of wisdom which you have acquired to the ransom of our world in the country to which you belong, by solving its problems by the Light of Theosophy. The Theosophical Society includes all parties, for each party holds but a partial view of truth; and it therefore preserves its neutrality, that all may enter within it and bring their fragment of truth to the helping of all. But Theosophy is not neutral, but all-pervading, all-enlightening, all-directing, for it is the Divine Wisdom which sweetly and mightily ordereth all things. Nothing useful to humanity is alien to it; no science, no art, but is within its purview; every department of life is illumined by it, and only in the Light can we find the Truth of anything. Do you ask me how we, with our partial knowledge can venture to apply it to the healing of the world? My answer to you is that Theosophy is the Parā-vidyā, the knowledge of Him by whom all things are known. You are Gods, but the God who is your Self is enveloped in the matter that blurs and blinds His outlooking. Seek for Him, find Him, set Him free, and you become Saviours of the world. Do you say that you are ignorant and helpless?

Rise out of your illusion, and shine out as the Gods you are. O ye of little faith; wherefore do ye doubt? Believe what you profess; let the Light in you shine out upon the darkened world. You know at least, that ignorance, dirt of body, emotions and mind, poverty, dying of want and wealth, dying of satiety, cruelty of man to man, of man to animals, impurity, greed, hatred, separateness, are all crimes against Brotherhood. Use this knowledge: where you see ignorance, carry your knowledge; where you see dirt carry your purity of body, emotion and mind; where you see poverty and wealth confronting each other, seek the causes in the Light of Theosophy and apply the root remedy of fraternal economics; where you see cruelty, interpose to stop it, not by hasty denunciation which increases anger, but by compassionate tenderness to the doer of it even more than to the victim. Let not a day pass that you do not give something of help to others, something of yourself; then as you rise and share what you have, you shall find your emptied hands filled to overflowing with more wealth to share, wealth of knowledge, wealth of insight, wealth of intuition, wealth of understanding, shall fill you with power, and the God within you shall call out the Gods around you in those who as a Master said, turn their backs on the sun, and standing in their own shadow call it dark. Have confidence

in your Self; have confidence in the Self in all you meet; realise that all selves are One Self. Go forth into the darkness and change it into Light. Make every department of life consciously Divine, as it is Divine in reality. From God come all Power, all Wisdom, all Love-in-Activity, and these three are the world's Redeemers. Then shall the desert through you blossom as a rose. That is your work. Go forth, and do it.

1930

In connection with the things for which she (H.P.B.) wished, there is one of which we seldom speak, but I should like to suggest it to you. It is about Adyar, the place which was some years earlier chosen by the Masters for the Centre, to which They sent her, that she might live there for some time and create there an atmosphere which would make it easy for it to receive Their influence, or any spiritual influence which was sent. She loved Adyar deeply. That is one reason which is strong in the minds of many of us, as to the value of Adyar; and another is that there is a direct communication between Adyar and the place that will be familiar to all of you who are Hindus, as a spot of special sanctity, Shamballa, the great City which was once on the "White Island". She always seemed to bear in mind the method by

which she could prepare a place in which people, coming to it for a short time, would receive real help in the spiritual life. And so she dwelt, at her Master's wish, in Adyar for some considerable time, in order that that place might become consecrated to Their service, and inspire all who came to it with the desire to draw nearer to Them.

It has been pointed out to me lately, and that is why I am mentioning it specially, that we are not all of us doing our duty to Adyar, as we are not helping to make Adyar what it ought to be; I had a hint on that subject from the two Masters who are most concerned with the Society, because they accepted the reponsibility of starting this public spiritual Movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Therefore I pass on the hint to you. You can carry out the thought of it in your daily lives, if you desire to do so, and also you can work for it quietly along those lines which are laid down. The emphasis which is laid upon Adyar is a matter in which, as the President of our Society, I most earnestly ask for your help. We can do a good deal at Adyar, if you decide that you will help us. You probably remember that we built a fairly large kind of Guest House, so that each National Society which wished to do so might send a representative thither to be trained in what I may call the attitude of Adyar to the outer world, and above all, the

attitude to the Masters. Perhaps enough advantage has not been taken of the suggestion by the different countries. Yet, forty-seven of them are Sections. Each country should choose some promising young man or woman and send that young man or young woman to stay at Adyar for a time, so that he or she may live in the atmosphere of the place, as well as receive the teachings; this would be of great use when he or she returned home. What I specially wish to do, if I can, as the result of our present meeting, is to send out the influence of the Masters into the Society, the atmosphere of the Masters from the place They founded to benefit the world. There are many of you who do not shrink from saying that you believe in Their existence. Some of you can go further and say: "We know that They exist." It is a personal matter for each to decide. But I would ask you to remember that on Their help and on Their blessing, and on our working along lines They laid down, the life of our Society really depends.

We must practise Brotherhood more thoroughly than we do, trying to help those who have had few of the advantages which we have had. We must remember that Theosophical work is a work which is beneficial to mankind, and I would not shut out from our work our younger brethren, our brethren of the animal kingdom. Do not let us forget them

in our Theosophy. They also are on the road of evolution; they have not yet passed the critical point at which they enter for the first time into a human body, and on the type of that human body much of their future depends. It is of course a matter of karma. But, on the other hand, it is part of our karmic duty to make the conditions as easily accessible as we are able to do by our best efforts.

Above all, let us remember that the best preacher and the best machinery for spreading Theosophy is by leading the Theosophical life; that example is more powerful than the most fervent speech of the most eloquent orator; *that* everyone of us can strive after as an ideal, an ideal that will grow into a reality as we patiently work. Our life is like a piece of marble, out of which we have to carve a statue of the perfect man. Let each of us carve it to the best of his ability, and then we shall become more useful to the great Helpers of the world, and be less unworthy when They call us Their brothers.

ANNIE BESANT